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ABSTRACT

There has been little agreement regarding appropriate definitions of social anxiety. Many existing definitions are conceptually problematic and these problems have had serious methodological implications. Social anxiety may be defined as anxiety resulting from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings. While it may seem tautological to define anxiety as anxiety, previous definitions have behavioral responses as defining characteristics of social anxiety. Since there is not a close or necessary relationship between social anxiety and interpersonal behavior (many people are able to maintain a false composure in spite of subjectively experiencing anxiety), these concepts should be defined independently and their relationship empirically established. In addition to conceptual problems, definitions of social anxiety based on specific behaviors raise methodological and measurement issues. Since social anxiety and behavior are not perfectly correlated, questions about respondents' behaviors as measures of anxiety levels are ineffective. To combat this problem, a self-report measure of social anxiousness with items assessing subjectively experienced anxiety, not behaviors, has been developed; the measure includes two subscales, one for face-to-face social anxiety (interaction anxiousness) and one for anxiety experienced in contingent encounters (audience anxiousness). The scales have been shown to possess high inter-item and test-retest reliability. (A copy of this Social Anxiousness Scale is appended.) (MCF)

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SOCIAL ANXIETY

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Problems with the Construct and Measurement of Social Anxiety¹

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With the exception of Paul's (1966) work on the desensitization of speech anxiety and Watson and Friend's (1969) publication of the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale, few significant empirical studies were conducted on the topic of social anxiety prior to 1970. However, since that time, the literature has grown rapidly. As is often the case in research areas that experience a sudden surge of interest and activity, research on the topic of social anxiety has not been accompanied by equally intense attention to definitional, conceptual, and methodological issues (see, however, Buss, 1980; Leary, 1982, Leary & Schlenker, 1981). There has been little agreement regarding appropriate definitions of social anxiety, many existing definitions are conceptually problematic, and these problems have had serious methodological implications. The purpose of this paper is to address a few of the problems that currently impede social anxiety research.

Conceptual Problems

Relatively few of the published studies dealing with social anxiety explicitly use that term in their titles. Rather, one sees references to constructs such as shyness, stagefright, heterosexual social anxiety, dating anxiety, speech anxiety, embarrassment, social-evaluative anxiety, communication apprehension, interpersonal anxiety, and audience anxiety.

¹Paper presented in M. R. Leary (Chair), Recent Research in Social Anxiety: Social, Personality, and Clinical Perspectives. Symposium presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D. C., 1982.

Although these terms are not synonymous, they all have as their common denominator anxiety experienced in certain social settings. Unfortunately, the fact that all of these constructs are different faces of the same general phenomenon--social anxiety--has seldom been acknowledged by researchers working on these various topics. There is a literature on shyness, a literature on speech anxiety, a literature on dating anxiety, and so on, but few researchers have attempted to integrate their work with closely-related research in other areas. Part of the problem is that there is no commonly accepted definition of social anxiety that precisely specifies the nature of social anxiety and that subsumes the constructs listed above. In addition, existing definitions are conceptually problematic for reasons to be discussed below.

As we will use it here, social anxiety is defined as anxiety resulting from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). We will use this definition as a framework for examining the construct of social anxiety.

First, by definition, social anxiety is a state of anxiety--defined as an aversive cognitive-affective response characterized by physiological arousal and apprehension regarding impending potentially negative outcomes. Although the statement that "social anxiety is anxiety" seems tautological, most researchers have not defined social anxiety in this way. Previous definitions of social anxiety (and of specific social anxieties) have included behavioral responses as defining characteristics of social anxiety. For example, one study defined social anxiety as "discomfort in social situations, along with a heightened avoidance of social situations"

(Clark & Arkowitz, 1975, p. 211). Similarly, Watson and Friend (1969, p. 448) define social-evaluative anxiety as "the experience of distress, discomfort, fear, anxiety, etc., in social situations; as the deliberate avoidance of social situations; and ... a fear of receiving negative evaluations." Some definitions are purely behavioral, such as Juss' (1980) definition of shyness as "the relative absence of expected behavior" (p. 184). In short, nearly every definition of social anxiety or one of its forms includes mention of avoidant, reticent, or hesitant kinds of behaviors. For both conceptual and methodological reasons, it does not seem prudent to define social anxiety in terms of interpersonal behavior.

The crux of the issue is that there is not a close relationship between social anxiety and interpersonal behavior, nor any reason to expect one (e.g., Farrell, Mariotto, Conger, Curran, & Wallander, 1979; Leary, 1982, in press; Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1982; Zimbardo, 1977). Although much research shows that, when people are socially anxious, they tend to speak less, socialize less, engage in less eye contact, avoid social encounters, appear nervous, and so on, there is not a perfect or necessary link between these kinds of behaviors and social anxiety (e.g., Cheek & Buss, 1981; Buss, 1980; Pilkonis, 1977). Many people are able to successfully maintain a visage of false composure in spite of subjectively experienced anxiety. Would such individuals be socially anxious? According to definitions that include a behavioral component, the answer would be "no" since they do not show the requisite behavioral signs. However, if we believe their self-reports and/or physiological data that

show they are aroused, we would conclude that they are, indeed, anxious. When viewed in this way, it is clear that social anxiety and behavior, though often related, are distinguishable constructs. They should be defined independently, and their relationship empirically established.

Methodological Implications

In addition to creating conceptual problems, definitions of social anxiety that include specific behaviors raise methodological and measurement issues. For example, all of the self-report questionnaires that are commonly used as measures of "dispositional" social anxiety confound the measurement of self-reported anxiety and behavior (Bellack, 1979; Leary, in press). Each of these scales includes items that ask respondents to indicate the degree to which they subjectively experience anxiety in certain social settings and the degree to which they behave in certain reticent, awkward, hesitant, and avoidant ways (e.g., Buss, 1980; Cheek & Buss, 1981; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; Paul, 1966; Watson & Friend, 1969). Since social anxiety and behavior are not perfectly correlated, it does not seem judicious to use questions about respondents' behavior as measures of their level of social anxiety.

To combat this problem, I recently developed a self-report measure of social anxiousness that includes items assessing subjectively experienced anxiety (nervousness, tension, etc.), but that does not include items dealing with specific behaviors (Leary, in press). Two subscales were developed, one for social anxiety experienced in face-to-face contingent encounters (interaction anxiousness) and one for anxiety

experienced in noncontingent encounters (audience anxiousness). These scales possess high interitem (.90) and test-retest (.80) reliability, and strong evidence of construct and criterion validity. A copy of the Social Anxiousness Scale is attached. (A full report of the development and validation of the scale is available from the author, Dept. of Psychology, Denison University, Granville, OH 43023.)

The social anxiety/behavior distinction is also relevant to research that examines the efficacy of clinical-counseling interventions designed to reduce anxiety, and to studies that investigate situational determinants of social anxiety. Many such studies have utilized behavioral observations as measures of social anxiety. It should be clear why this tack is not recommended. Indeed, researchers may often be interested in examining anxiety and overt behavior (and, increasingly, cognition, as well; see Cacioppo, Glass, & Merluzzi, 1979; Glass, Merluzzi, Biever, & Larsen, 1982). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the conceptual distinctions among these psychological phenomena and to measure them independently.

When this is done, not only is conceptual rigor increased, but a number of interesting questions are raised regarding the interrelationships among cognitions, social anxiety, and behavior.

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Social Anxiousness Scale (Leary, in press)

Interaction Anxiousness

1. I often feel nervous even in casual get-togethers.
2. I usually feel uncomfortable when I am in a group of people I don't know.
3. I am usually at ease when speaking to a member of the opposite sex.*
4. I get nervous when I must talk to a teacher or boss.
5. Parties often make me feel anxious and uncomfortable.
6. I am probably less shy in social interactions than most people.*
7. I sometimes feel tense when talking to people of my own sex if I don't know them very well.
8. I would be nervous if I was being interviewed for a job.
9. I wish I had more confidence in social situations.
10. I seldom feel anxious in social situations.*
11. In general, I am a shy person.
12. I often feel nervous when talking to an attractive member of the opposite sex.
13. I often feel nervous when calling someone I don't know very well on the telephone.
14. I get nervous when I speak to someone in a position of authority.
15. I usually feel relaxed around other people, even people who are quite different from me.*

Audience Anxiousness

1. I usually get nervous when I speak in front of a group.
2. I enjoy speaking in public.*
3. I tend to experience 'stage fright' when I must appear before a group.
4. I would be terrified if I had to appear before a large audience.
5. I get "butterflies" in my stomach when I must speak or perform before others.
6. I would feel awkward and tense if I knew someone was filming me with a movie camera.
7. My thoughts become jumbled when I speak before an audience.
8. I don't mind speaking in front of a group if I have rehearsed what I am going to say.*
9. I wish I did not get so nervous when I speak in front of a group.
10. If I was a musician, I would probably get 'stage fright' before a concert.
11. When I must speak in front of others, I worry about making a fool out of myself.
12. I get nervous when I must make a presentation at school or work.

Note. Subjects respond to each item on a 5-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely characteristic of me." Reverse score asterisked items before summing within each scale. A full report on the development and validation of the scales is available from the author upon request.